

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of Western Lake Erie: Documented Observations and Notes 1850-1980. Milton B. Trautman with Mary A. Trautman; edited by Ronald L. Stuckey. 2006. RLS Creations, Columbus, OH. 328 p. \$30.00, hardcover.

A wonderful read, written in looser prose than science now permits, yet with all the details and description science demands. Drs. Milton B. Trautman (1899-1991) and Mary (Auten) Trautman (1898-1986) made thorough and careful searches of 130 years of ornithological records, turn of the century sporting literature, and talked with old market hunters, trappers, and local Great Lakes commercial fishermen to gather information about all manner of water birds observed in the Western Lake Erie basin. In addition to documentation and probable description, the authors provide interesting vignettes on times and cultures, traditions past—such as remarks from old market hunters that Pied-Billed Grebe and Horned Grebe were actively marketed and considered “excellent” table fare. Further comments gleaned from past market hunters indicate populations of these species were felt to have declined significantly as natural marshes bordering Lake Erie were diked and drained, and aquatic vegetation for feeding and nesting diminished. These comments provide rare insight into changes in bird populations perceived by those present at the time, perceptions of effects of ecological change brought about by humans, and have the validity of coming from people who interacted with the species on a daily basis, relied on them for a living, and knew them well. Often such snippets of personal observation, historically based, are our only information from the past to indicate how and potentially why a species once abundant has changed. That aspect alone would make this a wonderful book to spend time perusing. Yet, its historical records and documentation adds a second level of enjoyment and enlightenment to the reader. How many Ohioans know there were Flamingos seen here in the wilds in the 1960s and 70s? They may have been escapees from a zoo or game farm—but they still lend a tropical flair to the state—especially coupled with Don Featherstones’ immortalizing the species in plastic in the 1950s when he created a beloved and tacky lawn ornament and, now, universally recognized icon of bad taste. Still, documented presence of Glossy Ibis and Tricolored Herons in Ohio over the years reported in the Trautmans’s book, both having origins in southern most latitudes of the US, indicate the Flamingos seen here could realistically have come up from Florida on their own.

Dr. Trautman’s personal daily field observation records, gathered with his wife from 1922 to 1980, are obviously well organized and tallied. They give unusual

levels of credibility to his comments about declines, increases, and fluctuations of local species over time. Thus, when he speaks of a gradual decline in migrating and nesting numbers of Killdeer observed during his life, it is not just a vague impression from memory, but an unquestionable fact based on 60 years of hard data. They speculate that habitat loss due to growth of cities and suburbs, drainage and cultivation of fields may partially explain the decline. This is the stuff that science needs but seldom has available to give us a better understanding of long term changes. Perhaps the book may even inspire some young naturalist to seek the Trautmans’ observation records and summarize the numerical data for future comparisons of species abundance—a much needed basis for making valid conclusions in a field where we have for far too long been more interested in checking off another bird on our life list rather than leaving a useful legacy of scientific import.

While emphasizing water birds, the book also discussed and documented other species Passarines, Piciformes (Wood Peckers), Troglodytes (Wrens), Tyrannidae (Kingbirds and Allies), and others—either common to Ohio, or mentioned as rare visitors.

With each species is a snippet of natural history—foods consumed, times of breeding and behavior, as well as germane comments about causes for decline—that is, “this species was not so ruthlessly hunted as some other heron species, because its plumes were relatively undeveloped and little sought by the millinery (hat making) trade,” referring to Little Blue Herons.

In many respects this book is a rare gem from another era—providing equal time for folklore, folk-knowledge, and more “scientific” insights on the life, times, and human impacts on native species found in the Western Lake Erie basin. It is a text to be savored and cherished for its naiveté and its accuracy. I highly recommend it to all with an interest in birds and the settlement history of Ohio and Michigan extending to Pre-Civil War folk times and into recent memory. He also includes notes about attempts to introduce new bird species to Ohio, re-establish breeding of Canada Geese—listing the last known breeding of resident Giant Canada Geese as the 1880s (before reintroduction), and about species extinctions within the state.

I’m buying four copies for friends!

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